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All the way with LBJ

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Abstract: *A fictional account of Lyndon Johnson's arrival in Sydney, Australia, on October 22, 1966.*

At Taylor Square, they came running from different directions, before they came to a halt at the edge of the crowd, craning for a look at the motorcade carrying Lyndon Johnson, President of the United States of America, and his wife, Lady Bird, which was caught up in a tangle of tickertape and confetti made out of used telephone books cut into squares.

Constable Gus Finlay rounded the corner and the crowd sprang upon him. There were Old Mother Hubbards in sunray-pleat crimplene and marquisite glasses, stenographers in beehives with frosted blue eyes and tarantula lashes, office clerks in suede-patched corduroy, marauding gangs of school children, soldiers and oldsters sporting war medals, a United States sailor minus his hat, and above this teeming mass of brightly painted humanity, a banner stretched from end to end of the square, 'Hip, hip, hooray for LBJ' (the rear of the sign viz. 'Hello, hello, Lady Bird' was designed to become visible once the cavalcade had passed).

The Citizen's Special Welcoming Committee had left nothing to chance. Earlier that morning Johnson had been greeted in the car park of Sydney Kingsford Smith Airport with a 50ft sign hoisted 60ft in the air and suspended between two mobile cranes, 'Welcome to Sydney — First City of

Australia'. Under the sign the cheering crowds had included 1,000 schoolchildren in ten-gallon white Stetsons, with bannerettes bobbing, 'Sydney's Day for LBJ', 'Cheer Today for LBJ' and 'Enjoy your Stay, LBJ'.

Flags wagged merrily along the route followed by the motorcade, turning down Oxford and College Streets, from Anzac Parade, with a further 2,000 banners draped across the street signs, redesignating them 'President Johnson's Way'. Shopfronts and office buildings had been draped in 9,000ft of tricolour bunting, 5,000 posters and 3,000 awning signs, distributed by the government, and hung courtesy of the city's civic-minded proprietors. The committee had also distributed to the public one million multi-coloured paper strips bearing the official 'hip, hip' wording, and 100,000 button badges featuring the President's photograph flanked by the Australian and United States flags, with the sticks bearing the flags of the two friendly nations tucked under the President's chin in the form of a Texan tie.

In special honour of the President's wife, the Royal Horticultural Society of New South Wales had decorated Queens Square with a blanket featuring one million flowers and stretching 150 yards from the corner of King Street to the Registrar General's Office. The Pigeon Fancier's Protection Union would also be releasing 200 homing pigeons from the roof of the Queens Square Courthouse, as the motorcade drew near. Outside Circular Quay a banner was flapping across the overhead railway, 'Sydney Welcomes the President of the USA to Circular Quay' and as the President boarded the official launch at the Maritime Services Board Jetty he would be greeted by a

jaunty-looking sign hanging down from the Overseas Terminal, 'Anchors Away for LBJ!'

Gus shoved his way through the forty-deep crowd with shoulders and elbows. Men lugging cameras were scuttling about, setting up tripods on the backs of utility trucks or clambering up the iron under-rails of shop awnings to grab a better shot. Up ahead he could make out the twinkle of a yellow badge on the dark serge of a copper's uniform, and in the open spaces of asphalt beyond the barricades, more cops, legs splayed, holsters dangling, and a handful of mounted cops, chestnut pelts glossy and sweating in the sunshine, horsetails twitching at blowflies.

An empty black car bearing the State government insignia turned into Oxford Street and slowed down. Gus badged his way through the police barricades as the car pulled up alongside the patch of dry grass outside Kinsellas Funerals. He stared through the dazzle of sunlight on chromium and safety glass at the eighteen black Lincolns circled around him, his green aviator glasses whitening with road glare.

Constable Pigeye Donaldson blinked back at him through orange-fringed lashes.

'Oi Pigeye,' said Gus. 'What's up?'

'Looks like his air-conditioning is bugged. This President says he wants a new car because he's unhappy with the sunshine.'

Gus laughed, and the two coppers exchanged gags. Then feeling the eyes of the top brass on him Gus swung his gaze around the square. A sprinkling of US agents with dark glasses and razor-scraped faces were

hanging around on the far side of the grass patch. Some were glued to walkie-talkies, others sharked around the cars, one slinging an automatic rifle, with eyes trained on a posse of housewives, searching for the first sign of trouble. Set back in the middle of this, the President's vehicle gleamed slick, black and bug-like, and smack in the open door of this arsenal-on-wheels sat Johnson — with a slab-like face, a bulbous nose, and eyes that were blue-ringed with heart ache.

The crowd cheered, waving their flags.

‘This here is real colourful,’ said Johnson. The crowd cheered again, and Johnson, feeling encouraged, stepped a few feet from the car. ‘You don't know how much this means to Lady Bird and me.’

‘On yer mate,’ somebody yelled from the back of the crowd.

‘Thank you.’ Johnson waved his hat in acknowledgment. ‘I guess all of you know who I am, but at least I didn't come here to ask you for anything, not even your vote.’

‘Why not?’ somebody yelled. ‘You're a politician, aren't you?’

‘I've got the week off.’

The crowd started laughing and Johnson grinned back at them, staring out over the dense mass of faces. There were people in sunhats draped over barriers, standing on wooden fruit crates, bobbing up and down at the edge of the crowd. He seemed to look right into each pair of eyes and linger, before moving onto the next, and the next.

‘This is a big beautiful country! I love this country!’

Johnson threw his hat off into the crowd. There was scuffling and screaming as a battalion of cub scouts began a fight to grab hold of it. Pressmen moved forward, flashing Nikons and Leicas. Pigeye swung his boot an inch from the nose of a photographer crawling, flat on his belly, over the asphalt.

‘Hey, you lot. Bugger off.’

A buttery-cheeked woman in a pink pillbox hat broke through the barricade, carrying a red beagle hound under each arm. The US agents closed in as the two beagles burst out of her arms, and ran yapping and yelping over the square. ‘But that one’s called Lady Bird,’ the woman whimpered. ‘That one’s called Lady Bird.’

Johnson turned. He picked up the dogs and carried them back to where the woman was standing. He put the dogs into her arms and gave them a presidential pat. ‘Well, isn’t that lovely,’ he said, and grinned at the woman until she was twitching all over with the pleasure of it. He glanced around, still patting the dogs. He looked at the people in the crowd to make sure they could see him. He turned towards the blokes with the Nikons and Leicas to make sure they could too. ‘Have you got it?’

They got off their photographs. Then the moment was gone.

‘Better pick her up before she faints,’ said Pigeye.

Gus escorted the woman back to an empty space behind the police barricade.

Johnson hoisted his balls, giving them a firm tug from the belt of his trousers. He had jetted into Sydney on the second leg of a Six Nation Pacific

Odyssey to rally support for his Vietnam Policy — to stop the spread of international communism southward from Hanoi to Saigon, across the Gulf of Siam to Bangkok, Singapore, Djakarta and Sydney, making Australia the Last Domino to fall. In Canberra the day before the Australian Prime Minister had pledged his nation to this shared American Destiny, leaping to the happy conclusion that Johnson valued his friendship and advice above that of any other head of government. Johnson was also pleased, extracting the promise of yet another commitment of Australian troops – a contingent of twenty-year olds conscripted by lottery.

‘How’s the war business, Butcher Bird?’

The shout came from nowhere. Gus spun around, scanning the densely packed bodies for a full fifteen seconds before he spotted the girl, sixteen, maybe seventeen, standing in front of a banner cut from a striped-flannelette bedsheet, strung across the awning of the Courthouse Hotel.

‘Oi!’ the girl called again. ‘Captain Slaughter!’

Several groups of young people in black t-shirts were wedging their way to the front of the crowd, milling about with the legitimate spectators. Pigeye walked off a few paces into the shade-dappled sunshine. His hat was damp about the outer-band where the sweat had soaked through, and his face was sun-stroked and worried.

‘Oh God,’ he muttered. ‘The brass aren’t going to like this.’

‘I reckon,’ said Gus.

Inside the circled black Lincolns a handful of local dignitaries were primping themselves, edging their way about the ends of the action. Hanging

towards the back of this gang was a powdery-faced man, short as a cockatoo, with eyebags, up-springing hair, and light-soaped black spectacles, immediately recognisable as the NSW Police Commissioner, Norman Allan, CMG. Gus drew in his breath, and leapt to attention. He needn't have worried. Allan wasn't looking at him. His eyes were fixed firmly on Premier Bob Askin, who was leading the dignitaries forward, with shuffling steps and arms extended, until they were standing shoulder to shoulder with the United States President.

Askin was dapperly dressed in a blue pinstripe suit, striped shirt and tie, with a cannon-shaped cigar clenched between rows of yellow-stained teeth. His cheeks were flushed to a happy sheen, but his eyes were flickering and anxious as he watched his ousted rival, the Labor Leader, Jack Renshaw, disgorge from his Holden, ten cars behind, with photographer in tow, to converge on the President.

Renshaw worked his way about the gathering. Askin moved sideways, trying to isolate his rival. It was a tight two-step of shins and knees, as each worked for advantage. Then an awful screw-up, as Renshaw staggered backwards, landing asprawl in the gutter. Gus leapt forward, raising him up. Askin, meanwhile, was doubled over laughing like a blue pinstriped walrus.

Johnson broke loose from the hugger-mugger. He stared at Gus. His eyes twitched. He turned back to Askin and asked, 'Who's that?'

'Why that's a copper. New South Wales' finest.'

'Hmm ... ' said Johnson, staring into the distance. He turned back to Askin, and slapped him on the back. Askin, feeling emboldened, clapped his

hands to his knees, and the two men began squeezing and pummelling each other, worrying themselves in the direction of the car.

Within minutes, the motorcade pulled back into formation. Mounted cops, cycle outriders, agents panting and jogging alongside the President's vehicle, and Gus riding in the police car that was snaking its way behind the horses.

Out on the street, the crowd was swelling in numbers, thickening with groups of gangly youths, and earnest-looking women in spectacles, who were elbowing their way up to the barriers. It seemed to start with a single black balloon floating down from the sky. Then another, and another.

Gus looked up.

They were floating from the hands of a girl in an orange headscarf standing on the rusty iron awning above the Liverpool Street corner. She was surrounded by a group of young men in black mourning bands, some of them scurrying rat-fashion along a length of steel cable, trying to haul up a sign over the Oxford Street intersection. The sign said, 'Stop the War in Vietnam'.

On the footpath below, the bodgie-types were converging in greater numbers, chanting and waving placards, 'Don't be Gay for LBJ,' 'We are not Gay' and 'Is it Gay in Vietnam?' The chanting rose to an eerie pitch, breaking into booing and stomping as the motorcade made its approach. Gus watched as Pigeye grabbed hold of a gingery-haired youth, dragging him screeching and kicking along the asphalt. The boy was still clutching his placard as Pigeye walloped him, and shoved him headlong into the cage of the waiting wagon. 'Conscripts No,' it read. 'Your Silence is Taken as Consent'.

Everywhere Gus looked, people were staring and wailing, and waving angry placards, some with flags of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front. A single-forlorn sign to the left of the barricades said, 'We Want the Beatles'. Three women scurried out from underneath it and began pelting the horses with pebbles.

The horses grew frisky. The crowd broke through the barrier at two points. Soon hundreds of people were pouring onto the asphalt, booing and chanting, pounding clenched fists on the roof of the car. They were only inches away, their eyes and noses pressed up to the windows, when a girl in a red twin-set burst through the storm wall of bodies. She tumbled over the bonnet and bumper of an advancing police car, landing on the asphalt with a sickening thud. The car swerved slightly, and creaked to a halt.

Gus got out.

There was shouting all around him, 'Quit Vietnam, quit Vietnam, quit Vietnam.' Before he could yell out or do anything, another two women rushed out. They were joined by three men with beards and a fresh-faced boy in striped shirt and spectacles, all of them lying on the asphalt beneath the wheels of the car.

'Officer?' Askin stuck his head out of the car window.

Gus swung around.

'What seems to be the trouble?'

'There's a bunch of young people lying on the road, sir. In front of the car.'

'What – a bunch of commies?'

'I dunno. Could be.'

'Well, don't just stand there. Run over the bastards.'

'Sir?' Gus blinked.

The mounted cops were turning their horses, pushing them further and further into the dense mass of bodies. Then the uniformed cops closed in, dropping identity badges into breast pockets, truncheons outstretched. They hauled off the girl in the red twin-set. They hauled off the bodgie-types and the young man in wire spectacles. Gus had to throw a few elbows to heave through the crowd. He got slammed in the eye, kicked in the mouth, struck in the teeth. He dived with his eyes squeezed tight into a thicket of fists and flailing limbs. The crowd surged, the horses plunged, their fetlocks shimmying in the sunshine.

... and all around was the roar which was long and rhythmic with an undertow like the whirring and grinding of January blowflies. He felt the blood in his head, the air in his lungs and everything about him reeling in the sunshine. He heard a long drawn out shriek of rubber on asphalt as the cavalcade turned tail and ducked down a side street. And the rest (so he read in the newspaper next morning) was History.

Camilla Nelson lectures in Creative Practices at the University of Technology, Sydney. She is the author of two novels, Perverse Acts, for which she was named one of the Sydney Morning Herald's Best Young Australian Novelists of the Year, and Crooked, which was short-listed in the 2009 Ned Kelly Awards. Camilla has been a

judge of the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and the Kathleen Mitchell Award. She has a Masters degree in History and a Doctorate of Creative Arts.